

The Independent - "*Santa Claus, the retail industry's poster boy for lavish spending in the build-up to Christmas, has been ditched as the cover star for this year's festive edition of the Radio Times. Instead they have put a Christmas tree on it. The argument has been that in these times of recession, Santa stands for excess rather than common sense.*"

There has of course been an outcry – how can the BBC abandon such an iconic and central figure of Christmas? I say, good for the BBC even if they have done it for the wrong reasons because the central figure of Christmas isn't Santa – it's Jesus. One of the biggest problems I have with Christmas is that there are so many symbols we associate with Christmas that have little to do with Christmas, the Americanised version of Santa and all the silly stories about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the mix of Christmas with the Muslim Eid, the Jewish Hanukkah and Hindu Diwali in many places, or its secularisation is that Jesus is relegated from the picture almost altogether as far as many people are concerned.

It's quite topical as we come to the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians. What we battle with at this season as we try to get the gospel message through to people is the same kind of battle as Paul faced with the small but significant minority of people in Corinth who were being led astray by false teachers.

There is something so modern about this passage. Paul wasn't just battling with the false teachers, but with the rather generous nature of the decent Christians who did follow his teachings. The problem was that they were tolerating the teaching of the "super-apostles" as Paul calls them, rather than standing against them. What seems to have irked him was that there were those in Corinth who wouldn't tolerate him but tolerated false teaching. They rejected the truth just because the lies had better packaging! But the Jesus was different. *3 For you gladly tolerate anyone who comes to you and preaches a different Jesus, not the one we preached*

I find verse that so 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We live in a tolerant pluralistic society. We treat people reasonably and decently. It is the way our society works and by and large for society it is a good thing. In fact Baptists have been right at the centre of arguments about freedom to believe, of tolerance and freedom of expression for four centuries because we used to be victims of prejudice and intolerance. But how far should tolerance go in the church?

That's a good question. We are looking precisely at that one as a church with regard to whether the local Quaker Meeting should be admitted to Churches Together in Felixstowe. Where do we draw the line between acceptance and refusal for the local Quakers?

All I can offer as an answer is what Paul says here. It is scripture after all and I believe it gives us at least the issues to consider and the questions to ask when we are presented with a Jesus we're not familiar with, or a Holy Spirit that seems strange or a gospel that says something peculiar.

So what does Paul say?

1. **We should endeavour to be faithful to Christ only.**

*2 I am jealous for you, just as God is; you are like a pure virgin whom I have promised in marriage to one man only, Christ himself.* Paul's aim for them which he acted jealously about was that they remain faithful to Christ only. To put it bluntly, we are a Christian church. Jesus Christ is at its centre. We are just about to celebrate Christmas having passed through Advent. And what's it about – God becoming a human being and that man was Jesus. He was and is, wholly God and wholly human. It's what characterises the Christian faith and because of who He is. The Christian faith stands and falls on the person of Jesus Christ and it's a truth we need to guard jealously as Paul tried to jealously guard it for them.

But there's another reason in this verse. Paul uses the picture of marriage to describe our relationship with Christ. We are in Christ – He is the bridegroom and Paul's desire is that we be presented as a virgin – not someone who is going to be tarnished by playing around with that which is not of Christ. Why did Joseph want to divorce Mary – despite how nicely he planned to do it? He thought she had been playing around and had been unfaithful to him. Jesus deserves our worship, our obedience and our faithfulness. That's our priority however interesting, enticing or even reasonable other people's religious or moral philosophy might seem.

## 2. Take care not to be deceived

*I am afraid that your minds will be corrupted and that you will abandon your full and pure devotion to Christ--in the same way that Eve was deceived by the snake's clever lies.*

Why did Adam and Eve fall. Because the snake deceived them. They allowed him to fill their minds full of questioning and rubbish. Before they know it, they had been led astray. We must understand that the satan works through subtlety, by making that which is an abhorrence to God seem acceptable. There is for example so much in a modern Christmas that simply doesn't have an origin with Jesus Christ or with God's people. Let's not be enticed by it. Just because everyone does it or everyone believes it doesn't mean that Jesus wants us to do it. Let's not let the snake deceive us.

## 3. Examine what is being presented to you

The final point is the most practical. If we want to honour Jesus and not be deceived, we need to seriously examine those things in our society and in our own personal behaviour that militate against the things of God. Paul gives us three questions we can ask at any time our faith comes under question, particularly from other groups or people in our own lives and church that behave differently to us or give a different message. Here they are:

- ***Is it another Jesus?*** There's only one Jesus. He's the way the truth and the life. The Christian faith is very exclusive at it's root. He's the only way by which people can be saved. If the Jesus people preached is not both God and human, if He did not die and rise again, if He is only one of many ways to God – then that's not the Jesus of the Bible and of 2000 years of history.
- ***Is it another spirit?*** One of the most worrying things about our modern society is the way in which people have an interest in new age spiritualism. At the heart of many practices in our society are the values and the remnants of other faiths. Christmas is an example of that. There are lots of things that have nothing to do with Jesus Christ but are perversions of other things and they are some of the most enduring Christmas images – holly, mistletoe, robins, snow, even Santa are not exactly much to do with Christmas except where we have tagged them on to the Christian faith – this is called syncretism. In fact they have origins beyond Christianity. Even some Christian images of Christmas that we know and love aren't in the Bible – the little donkey that carried Mary, the stable, the inn, the three kings. Always go by what God's word says – because it's of the Spirit, not anything or anyone else.
- ***Is it another gospel?*** Even more critical, does someone suggest that there is more than one message? And is it good news? For Paul the message of his critics wasn't the Gospel. They said God was a gracious God but the only way that that salvation would be completed would be if people took all the trappings of the law into their lives. Our good news is that by grace God has desired to know us. Because of His grace He became human, because of grace Jesus died on the cross, by grace we have been saved through faith. We are objects of grace from beginning to end.

But so often down the ages we have added to our gospel through what I would call “grace plus”. Grace plus going to church, grace plus doing religious acts, grace plus law, grace plus going to a certain type of church, or denomination or using a particular kind of Bible. And added to it is “or else”. Grace plus law or else you're lost. False gospels are always gospels of no hope because at the end of them there is no assurance of salvation.

There is only one gospel – if people say there is another way, or they only have the way, or the gospel we have isn't fully sufficient, or worse, isn't important, then they are following another gospel. Is it important that we challenge those who bring another message. After all, shouldn't we be tolerant? Here's something Paul wrote in Galatians. Galatians 1:6-9 *I am surprised at you! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. 7 Actually, there is no other gospel, but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell! 9 We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell!*

Paul doesn't mince his words does he? Doesn't sound too tolerant to me. Why is he so aggressive? Because anyone who preaches another gospel is leading someone astray. It is a matter of life and death and they are leading someone to death. That's why Paul says: We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell! Ouch!

These questions, if taken seriously allow us to evaluate anyone coming preaching a different gospel, or something new about Jesus, or a new revelation of God. We get them in every generation. There's almost a new issue every year.

We already have the right questions to ask – Paul wrote them down 2000 years ago. And the Quakers? Ask them these three questions and see what answer you get.

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